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ABSTRACT

A study established the extent of literacy deficits among participants in Victoria's Job Network, Job Search Training (JST) programs, and the impact that identified literacy deficits are having on job seekers' ability to participate in the Australian Job Search program and on their job seeking potential. Data were sought from 35 programs (with more than 102 sites) through a 17-item question survey instrument. The return was 57 percent. Findings indicated that as many as one in five Victorian job seekers undertaking Job Search Training as part of the Social Security mandated "mutual obligation" activity do, in fact, have significant literacy deficits. This finding pointed to a deficiency in the current assessment tool, the Job Seeker Classification Instrument, universally applied to all registered job seekers by Centrelink to categorize the level and type of Job Network assistance needed. Clearly, significant numbers of job seekers requiring literacy interventions were, inappropriately, finding their way into JST programs. The research identified another major problem--the lack of dedicated referral pathways between Job Network providers and those specialist programs that have been funded to deal with literacy issues. Mainly, JST providers relied on the local knowledge of their staff to provide appropriate referrals, but many providers surveyed complained about a lack of knowledge about appropriate support mechanisms for those job seekers with literacy deficits. (Instruments are appended.) (YLB)

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Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium

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John Quelch

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Summary

This research set out to establish the extent of literacy deficits amongst participants in Victoria's Job Network, Job Search Training (JST) programs and the impact that identified literacy deficits are having on the job seekers' ability to participate in the Job Search program and on their job seeking potential.

The research found that as many as one in five Victorian job seekers undertaking Job Search Training as part of the Social Security mandated 'mutual obligation' activity do, in fact, have significant literacy deficits.

This finding points to a deficiency in the current assessment tool, the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI), universally applied to all registered job seekers by Centrelink to categorise the level and type of Job Network assistance. Clearly, significant numbers of job seekers requiring literacy interventions are, inappropriately, finding their way into Job Search Training programs. Although largely unresourced to deal with the issue of literacy deficits amongst job seekers, many agencies have adapted their JST programs in a range of creative ways to meet the individual needs of those job seekers facing significant barriers to employment.

The lack of dedicated referral pathways between Job Network providers and those specialist programs that have been funded to deal with literacy issues was another major problem identified by this research. In the main, Job Search Training providers rely on the local knowledge of their staff to provide appropriate referrals but many of the providers surveyed for this research complain about a lack of knowledge regarding appropriate support mechanisms for those job seekers with literacy deficits.

The importance of Job Search Training programs in developing the trust and confidence of job seekers with literacy deficits, and the significant role that JST programs often play in developing the confidence of clients to consider additional training options, was also highlighted by this research.

Background

In June of 1998, the face of Employment Service delivery in Australia underwent radical change with the introduction of the Job Network. A raft of services previously delivered by the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) were tendered out to the community and private sector in one of the most historically significant privatisations of federal Government labour market service delivery.

Nationwide over 400 business and community, non-profit organisations were successful to varying degrees in the tender process. The five Employment Service programs available for tender included Job Matching (i.e. the labour exchange service previously provided by the CES), Job Search Training, Intensive Assistance (i.e. case-management), Entry Level Training Services (i.e.Traineeships/apprenticeship services) and the New Enterprise Initiative Service (i.e. the provision of small business training). All but one of these programs (Intensive Assistance) was tendered on a price competitive basis.

This research has chosen to focus on the Job Search Training component of the 15 month old Job Network for the following three main reasons:

1 The key researcher has had a decade's experience as an employment service delivery practitioner within a variety of not-for-profit, community sector agencies. This experience extends back to the time before the existing Job Network when Job Search Training programs were operated under the *Job Club* brand name.

Unlike the other Job Network services, Job Search Training, both in its current form and in its guise of *Job Club*, has been continuously tendered to the community non-profit sector agencies since the program's inception in 1986. Government has consistently assessed *Job Club*, and its successor program Job Search Training, as one of the most successful labour market programs of all times in terms of employment outcomes per unit of funding. The fact that the program has survived over two decades of continuous change within the labour market service industry is a strong endorsement of its durability and effectiveness.

2 As a current staff member of MEP JOB *futures*, a Geelong-based, Job Network member, the researcher has recently participated in the design, delivery and management of Job Search Training programs.

The principal researcher and his colleagues within MEP JOB *futures* have become increasingly aware of the significant numbers of Job Search Training (JST) participants that struggle with basic literacy tasks. This is despite the fact that Centrelink's universally applied assessment tool, the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) has, in theory at least, been designed to identify those clients facing significant barriers to employment. Although the JSCI has been designed to screen out unemployed people with significant language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) deficits in order to direct them to Intensive Assistance services, it has become obvious to the researcher and his colleagues that many job seekers requiring specialised LNN assistance are still being referred to JST programs.

3 The researcher and his colleagues at MEP JOB *futures* have a growing belief that the JST program provides one of the few effective, group-based, training and mutual support opportunities for job seekers within the existing stable of Job Network programs. Moreover, because JST relies heavily on a certain level of competency in the use of LLN skills, the program is likely to be a key nodal points on the continuum of employment service delivery where LLN issues can be effectively identified and dealt with. This research was seen as an important opportunity to test this hypothesis more widely across the Employment Services field in Victoria.

JST programs are delivered in each region of Australia by a variety of non-Government for profit and not-for-profit agencies contracted by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business (DEWRSB).

Along with the other Job Network services, JST is part of the Federal Government's 'mutual obligation' expectation placed upon unemployed people receiving benefits. The program provides 15 days of intensive skills development including resume preparation, job application preparation, interview training and personal assistance with active job canvassing. Participants are referred to a given JST program through an automated, computerised system (i.e. the Integrated Employment System commonly known as the IES). Participation in the program is compulsory and is only open to Centrelink registrants that have been unemployed for more than 3 months.

Statistics available to date from DEWRSB suggest that somewhere between 30 to 35 per cent of participants in JST programs do in fact secure employment some time during the three-week program or within 13 weeks of its completion. Those JST participants failing to secure employment are eventually directed towards the Intensive Assistance case management program after several additional months of continuing unemployment.

To date little detailed research into the Job Network has been undertaken apart from a number of DEWRSB commissioned reports highlighting the enhanced performance of the Job Network over the former CES. In terms of measuring the success of the new system, Government is choosing to rely mainly on quantitative, employment outcome data. Little or no research has been undertaken to date on qualitative aspects of the new arrangement particularly in regards to how effectively the system is dealing with job seekers facing severe barriers to employment including those job seekers with LLN problems.

Given the paucity of current research and the host agency's experience in the delivery of JST, the research team felt that a focus on LLN issues within JST programs may help to highlight some qualitative features of the new system. In relation to examining LLN within JST programs within Victoria, four key objectives were established. The research sought to:

1 Document the extent of LLN problems amongst Job Search Training participants in Victoria.

2 Document the extent to which low literacy levels are effecting employment outcomes for Job Search Training participants in Victoria.

3 Locate and popularise examples of 'cutting-edge' practice in dealing with literacy issues amongst Victoria's Job Search Training providers.

4 Ensure the findings and recommendations of the research are made widely available to Job network agencies providing JST and to key policy makers within relevant Government departments.

Methodology

A 17-question survey was designed by the research team to elicit information about LLN issues within the 35 Victorian Job Network agencies providing JST (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the survey).

Before being posted out to all Victorian Job Network agencies contracted to provide JST services, the survey was first pilot tested within the principal researcher's own agency (i.e. MEP JOB *futures*). The survey was amended after a number of constructive suggestions for improvements from the agency personnel and the research team.

The survey was designed to elicit a range of information around four key themes including:

1 The number and percentage of young job seekers being referred to JST by Centrelink.

2 The numerical and percentage extent of literacy problems amongst participants in JST programs.

3 The perceived impact upon JST participation and employment outcomes of those participants identified with LLN issues.

4 Approaches JST agencies have adopted in dealing with LLN issues.

Although 35 organisations are contracted by DEWRSB to provide Job Search Training within Victoria, a number of these organisations operate JST training from more than one site. Whilst 102 JST sites for these 35 organisations are listed on DEWRSB's National Vacancy Data Base, in reality many agencies list multiple sites as contact points for the service whilst operating the JST service from one or two sites only.

Given this understanding, the research team made a decision to post surveys with stamped addressed return envelopes to all listed sites to maximise the possibility of receiving at least one return from each agency in the State. The approach resulted in receiving 22 survey returns from a total of 20 agencies. Feedback from agencies indicated that despite receiving the survey at a number of sites most agencies decided to make just one collective response to the survey regardless of the number of JST operational sites listed for a given agency. Only two of the agencies surveyed supplied multiple responses to the survey.

All agencies that failed to respond were followed up by a phone call on at least two occasions. The reasons offered for failing to return the survey fell into one of the following two categories:

1 A number of agencies indicated they were short of resources and lacked the time to be in a position to make a considered response and therefore declined the opportunity to undertake the survey.

2 Four agencies indicated their unwillingness to supply data about their JST operations to what they perceived as a competitor organisation (i.e. JOB *futures*).

Upon follow up, a number of agencies indicated their preparedness to complete the survey but, for undisclosed reasons failed to carry through on their commitment.

Notwithstanding the inevitable frustrations in collecting surveys, the research team considered the response rate of 57% satisfactory for ensuring the reliability of collected data.

Presentation of findings

(Question-by-question analysis of the 17-Question survey from the 22 respondent JST programs across Victoria)

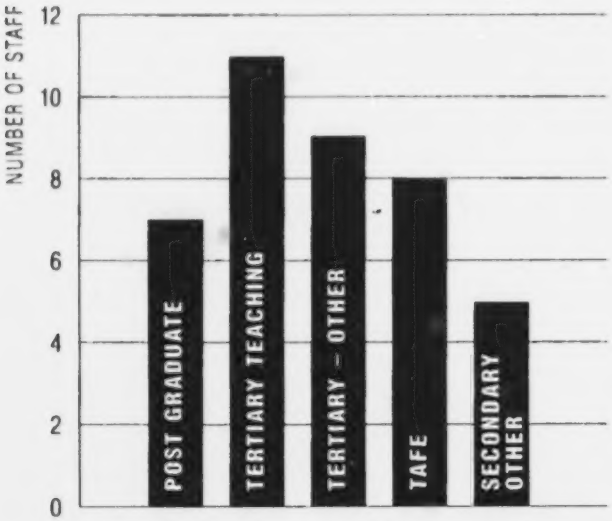
Q.1 – in the survey – job search training numbers

The 22 programs surveyed have all been operational as Job Network service providers for the past 15 months and have delivered a three-week, JST program for between 48 and 1,500 clients during that time. On average, 274 job seekers per respondent agency have participated in JST during the 15 months until November, 1999.

Q.2 – staff qualifications

90% of Job Search Training program delivery staff in this survey has completed some form of undergraduate or postgraduate training. 27% of respondents are qualified teachers and approximately 20% had some form of postgraduate qualifications in areas ranging across the Arts, Social Science, Criminology, Community Development and Social Work.

Job Search Staff Education Level



Q.3 – JST clients in the 18 to 24 y.o. categories

Over the 22 respondent programs, the percentage of job seekers undertaking Job Search Training in the 18 to 24 y.o. age category ranges from 1% to 60% with an average of 21%. Over half of the agency respondents indicated that 20% or more of their participants fall into this age category.

Q.4 – JST participants experiencing LLN problems

20 of the 22 respondent agencies indicated their belief that job seekers with LLN problems had participated in their JST programs.

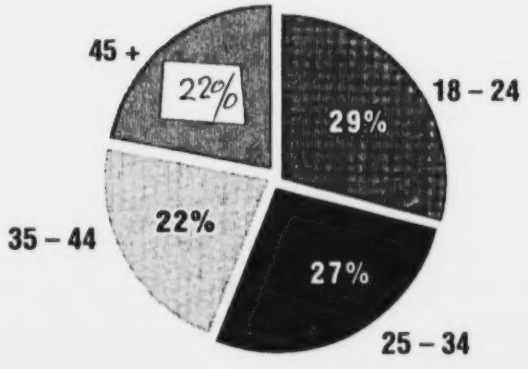
Q.5 – estimated percentage of JST clients with LLN problems

A broad range of responses were received from respondent agencies ranging from two agencies that indicated they had no job seekers with literacy problems through to one agency that indicated 40% of its participants experienced some degree of LLN difficulties. The average figure for JST clients experiencing LLN problems across all 22 programs was 12.6%.

Q.6 – age grouping amongst which LLN most prevalent

Agencies indicated that concern with LLN issues was spread relatively evenly across the various age groupings.

Age Grouping amongst which LLN problems most prevalent



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Q.7 – how agencies identify LLN problems

A large majority of agencies (83%) indicated that LLN concerns are usually first identified when written work is undertaken in the classroom setting. However, 50% of the agencies also relied on self-disclosure as a means of identifying job seekers with LLN problems. Interestingly, only 39% of agencies reported being able to isolate the issue at the time of referral and only one agency used a semi-formal LLN assessment. In the face of increasing concern about the extent of LLN issues amongst Job Search Training clients, this agency had developed its own simple checklist tool to ensure that clients requiring LLN support are referred to the appropriate assistance programs (see Appendix 2 for a copy of this check list tool).

Q.8 – agencies' evidence that JST client has LLN difficulties

Agencies offered a broad range of responses ranging from LLN problems not being an issue within the agency (one organisation) through to clients with LLN issues being withdrawn, not wanting to participate and utilising avoidance techniques such as transparent excuses as to why they are unable to attend the program. The majority of agencies indicated that clients with LLN issues typically struggle with the large amount of written work demanded of job seekers undertaking Job Search Training and that LLN issues are generally revealed through illegibly written and poorly spelt job applications and resumes with little attention being paid to grammatical sentence construction.

One agency indicated that another giveaway that JST clients may be experiencing LLN problems is their frequent refusal to contemplate careers beyond labouring and unskilled occupations.

Q.9 – how agencies assess LLN problems

Almost all agencies report utilising informal assessment methods based on the observation of clients undertaking tasks such as: completing registration forms, job application letters and resume preparation. Only one agency, the Activate Training Centre in Prahran, reported the regular use of a formal, agency-developed, assessment tool that established the clients' actual level of literacy against the National Reporting System. Through the use of this measurement tool, this agency recorded a 15% rate of clients experiencing LLN difficulties (see Appendix 2 for a copy of the Activate-developed screening tool).

One agency also noted that in their experience younger job seekers in the 18-24 y.o. age group are more likely to be open about their LLN problems whilst older job seekers in the 45+ age category are more inclined to be embarrassed about their problem and consequently employ more strategies to cover up the problem.

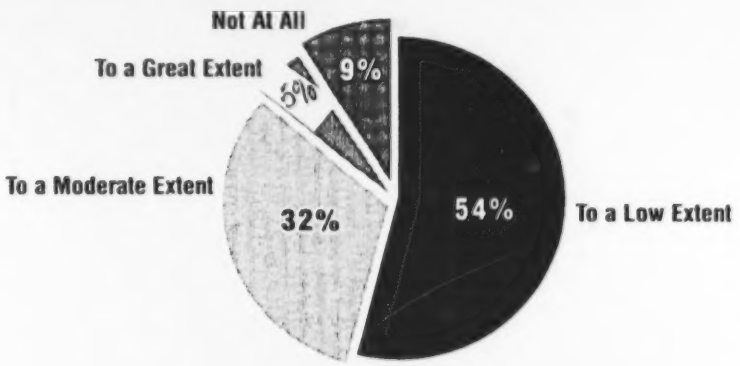
Q.10 – what agencies perceive as main effects of LLN deficits on job seekers

Agencies supplied a range of responses but the overwhelmingly dominant opinion was that LLN deficits impact most negatively on client self-esteem and that lack of self-confidence dampened clients' ability to accept the possibility of career change or challenge. A number of agencies indicate that clients with LLN deficits usually restricted their job search to low-income careers based around unskilled, manual work. Four agencies commented on the fact that clients with LLN deficits were usually unable to fully participate in, and take advantage of programs such as Job Search Training. Interestingly, one agency observed that clients experiencing LLN difficulties during JST would either compensate by becoming withdrawn and uncooperative or would go to the other extreme and display brash and over-confident behaviours.

One agency made the interesting comment that the JST program, along with the entire stable of programs on offer in the Job Network, was 'extremely text-based' and that without good case-management, any client with LLN problems would have severe difficulty in accessing work.

Q.11 – how LLN deficits interfere with participation in JST

Impact of LLN deficits on JST Participation



As can be seen from the above graph, a majority of agencies (12) indicated their belief that poor LLN skills impacted on JST participation to a low extent only. Seven agencies indicated a moderate degree of impact whilst only one agency indicated poor LLN skills amongst participants greatly interfered with the clients' ability to participate in the program.

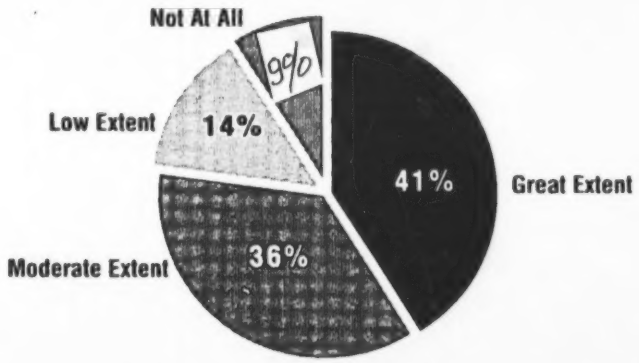
Almost universally, those agencies that noted a low or moderate extent of interference in JST participation amongst clients experiencing LLN deficits indicated that they had intentionally modified the presentation of their JST programs in order to reduce the potential for negative impact. These agencies all described modifying their programs in a manner that relied less on written content and more on discussion, visual presentation and one-to-one training. Such methods that avoided exposing and embarrassing participants who were experiencing difficulties, whilst maximising opportunities to assist clients facing LLN difficulties. Indeed, one agency indicated that it had abandoned group-based activities altogether because of the huge ability range extant within a typical JST program in order to maximise assistance to those participants experiencing problems.

A number of agencies delivering JST reported the adaptation of their programs in recognition of the fact that a significant proportion of participants are unable to cope in a largely text-based, classroom-style program. These agencies have moved to individually tailored program designs that provide significant levels of one-to-one tuition and support in a secure and trusting environment.

Of the two agencies that indicated that low LLN skills amongst participants had no impact at all upon participation in JST, one failed to give any reason whatsoever whilst the other had developed a policy of always referring clients requiring assistance into their 'in-house' LLN development program.

Q.12 – how LLN deficits amongst JST clients interfere with their ability to find suitable employment

Extent to which LLN deficits impact on employment outcomes



Over 75% of respondents indicated their belief that LLN deficits impacted (either to a great or a moderate extent) on a JST participant's potential to find employment.

Several agencies indicated that people with low-level LLN skills would be more likely to seek work in unskilled, labouring or factory situations.

Two agencies also made the point that personality factors were also important in determining how well a person with LLN deficits would perform in the job market and it would be unfair to categorise all JST participants with LLN problems as necessarily struggling to find employment. These agencies stated that because of personality differences, self-esteem levels and other issues, low levels of LLN skills impacted differently on different individuals.

Q.13 – approaches adopted by JST agencies in assisting JST clients with LLN problems

A number of agencies spoke about the informal approaches that their JST personnel had adopted to 'work around' or 'work with' the problem. In the main these approaches involved the provision of more individualised approaches with one-to-one assistance being provided with job applications, resume preparation, career planning and learning to access the National Vacancy Data Base (NVDB).

60% of the agencies indicated that they have adopted a policy of referring those clients experiencing LLN difficulties to local agencies that can provide specialised support and assistance. Agencies such as the Council of Adult Education, Adult Migrant English Services, TAFE and Skillshares were all mentioned as potential points of referral, although two respondents indicated that their own agencies have developed 'in house' LNN training programs that expedite the referral of job seekers experiencing difficulties. Several agencies indicated a lack of knowledge about appropriate local referral points for clients experiencing LLN difficulties. Only one agency indicated they would refer the person with LLN problems back to Centrelink for reassessment.

Three agencies indicated that that it could be quite counterproductive to force clients experiencing LLN difficulties into attending specialist support programs, although it was important to make sure clients were aware of available options and could access these programs when ready.

A number of agencies pointed out that, for many participants experiencing LNN problems, JST training was often the first point of contact with a formal learning environment and, if handled sensitively, was an excellent base from which clients could be encouraged to contemplate further education and training options. One agency highlighted the issue of 'trust' as being the key to building a positive working relationship with job seekers experiencing LLN difficulties and that, if handled sensitively, JST programs could be an effective point of intervention.

Q.14 – ways in which JST training enhances LLN of participants with low LLN

Some agencies indicated their belief that JST had minimal or no impact on the enhancement of LLN performance. However, a larger number indicated their belief that the program did positively impact upon many participants' sense of self confidence and motivation to recommence some form of formal retraining or education.

Several agencies also made the point that JST was not the appropriate mechanism for dealing with literacy deficits because there was neither the time nor resources to effectively provide the support. However, two agencies made the point that JST was, for many participants struggling with LLN issues, the first time they had returned to a formal education setting since leaving school. Moreover, these agencies indicated that if the JST program was delivered in a manner that built confidence and trust with the group struggling with LLN issues, it could be an extremely important launching pad for further intervention.

Q.15 – the extent of written LNN policies within surveyed agencies

Approximately 63% of agencies indicated their organisation had no formal written policy dealing with LLN issues whilst 37% claimed to have some form of written policy. A number of the agencies with formal written policies indicated that the requirement within the policy was to refer JST clients with LLN issues onto appropriate LLN, community-based programs.

Q.16 – innovative LLN practices within JST programs

30% of agencies responding to the survey indicated some level of innovative practice in dealing with LLN deficits.

Three agencies indicated their belief that the quality of relationship formed during the JST program was the key issue effectively assisting clients deal with their LLN difficulties. These agencies placed a great deal of emphasis on developing adult-based, supportive, constructive, non-judgmental learning environments in their JST programs that helped dissipate fear and open job seekers experiencing problems to countenance a future where their LLN difficulties could be overcome.

A number of agencies pointed to the need for one-to-one, individualised approaches to maximise learning opportunities although two agencies emphasised the point that the JST programs were inadequately resourced to deal effectively with the issue.

One agency pointed out that job seekers with LLN difficulties usually experience difficulties in other areas of their lives and that LLN difficulties can only be effectively dealt with in an environment of support for the whole individual.

Another agency argued that LLN programs in themselves were often confronting for clients ('like being sent to AA') consequently adult-based, holistic programs were required that encouraged LLN learning incidentally within the context of a broader, life-skills enhancement program.

Q.17 – other ideas to assist job seekers experiencing LLN difficulties

A number of agencies indicated the need for more innovative adult learning programs that could reintroduce adult learners with LLN problems to the world of learning in an environment that quickly built trust and defused issues of embarrassment about LLN deficits.

Two agencies requested the supply of high quality visual program aids to assist in making the JST program far less print reliant.

One agency argued that further training in LLN issues should be made available to JST facilitators to strengthen their ability to identify, and deal effectively with, job seekers experiencing LLN difficulties.

One JST program facilitator was keen to make the point that pronunciation was an aspect of literacy training often neglected by specialist LLN programs. This facilitator, with more that ten years JST delivery experience, said that he had dealt with many job seekers over the

years from both educated and uneducated backgrounds whose full potential was often not realised through their inability to pronounce words correctly or use correct grammatical form. He strongly believed far greater emphasis needed to be placed on this aspect of literacy in the delivery of JST and LNN programs.

A number of agencies believed there was a serious lack of information about where to go for LLN assistance in their regions and several agencies expressed the opinion that there were insufficient resources available in their region to effectively deal with the issue.

One provider suggested the establishment of a Literacy Help Telephone Hotline and Literacy Help, Internet Web page that would quickly link people and agencies requiring assistance to the most suitable local resource.

One agency argued that greater assessment and filtering was required by Centrelink because there were still significant numbers of job seekers requiring LLN assistance being inappropriately referred to JST programs.

Discussion

It is clear from this research that JST programs in Victoria are dealing with significant numbers of job seekers with LLN deficits. The average figure of 12.6% is somewhat deceptive and belies the fact that some JST programs report levels of LLN deficit as high as 40% with the majority of agencies reporting rates of 20% or more. Despite Centrelink's JSCI filtering tool, far too many job seekers requiring specialist LLN assistance are being referred into the state's JST programs.

Whilst this research would suggest that JST programs in Victoria are, in the main, delivered by tertiary trained and relatively experienced course facilitators, the resources available are viewed by the majority of agencies in this survey as being too limited to allow for effective LLN intervention.

It is interesting to note that despite most agencies indicating that JST is not the right forum for effectively dealing with LLN issues, almost universally the agencies in this survey had adapted the delivery of their programs to cater for the broad range of ability levels typically encountered in any JST group.

Indeed, several organisations made the point that significant numbers of participants are unable to cope in a traditional classroom style program with its heavy reliance on written course material. As a consequence, most of the surveyed organisations have adapted their programs in a manner that provides for a far greater focus on working with participants on an individual basis to ensure those clients with LLN deficits receive effective assistance. One agency described abandoning group-based processes altogether in the face of the broad range of needs present in any given JST group and moving to a program format where the needs of individual participants can be more readily addressed.

A number of interesting case studies were collected from agencies describing the impact of low LLN levels on JST clients' lives. Two, in particular, have been selected to highlight the key themes raised throughout the research by the surveyed agencies. (Please note, to ensure confidentiality identifying data has been altered).

Case study 1

After several months of unemployment, Centrelink referred John aged 35, from Anglo Celtic background, to a metropolitan JST program.

Upon registration, it became clear to staff that John was struggling with his LLN skills as he had extreme trouble filling in the program registration forms and needed to turn to staff on several occasions for assistance. In private, after registration, John reluctantly disclosed to staff his LLN problem and expressed reluctance to participate in what he saw as another form of the same schooling that originally left him feeling alienated and bitter about the educational system.

After a degree of mutual understanding and trust had been built between John and the JST course coordinator, he eventually made it known to that he had left school at the age of 15 because of his inability to cope with the written work and general discontent with the entire educational system. What made matters worse for John's self esteem was the fact that his twin brother had made a success of his schooling and, as result of leaving school early, John had become relatively alienated from his entire family.

John had been through a series of low-paid, unskilled jobs after leaving school, interspersed with increasingly longer periods of unemployment in areas such as general labouring, factory production work and in stores. In his last storeroom job, John had learnt (unofficially but competently) to handle a forklift. He made the comment, however, that he was unlikely to regain work of this type because most employers would require an official forklift licence and that lack of literacy would disqualify him from the process.

John had a particular aversion to the group-based nature of the program and, despite efforts by the JST program coordinator to engage him on a one-to-one basis, became increasingly withdrawn from the 14 other participants making up this particular JST group. The program coordinator opened a discussion with John about local, adult training options that could effectively assist him to deal with his LLN problems. Disappointingly, John left the program after the first five days and eventually a message was relayed via a friend that John had moved on to a country town.

This case study serves to highlight a number of the key issues raised by this research. For example, the extreme difficulty JST programs face in dealing effectively with the needs of participants with LLN barriers, particularly when the person in question is fearful of anything associated with what they perceive as traditional classroom activity, is poignantly highlighted.

Faced with the requirement to cater for the needs of the other 14 participants in the JST group, the program coordinator has limited time and resources to engage a person whose level of self-esteem has been damaged to such an extent that only a long period of positive, trusting engagement on an individual basis will make sufficient difference to assist the client into beginning to believe in themselves to the extent that they would be prepared start taking chances with learning once again.

Having said this, it is obvious the JST coordinator in this case study not only quickly identified the issue but made many positive steps in the short time available to win the confidence of this participant and to attempt to encourage positive intervention.

Above all, the case study highlights how difficult the process of working with adults with damaged self-esteem can be, and how much more realistic and achievable the task might be if improved resourcing were to be made available to those JST programs encountering significant numbers of participants requiring LLN assistance.

Case study 2

The second case study highlights a more positive facet of how a job seeker with LLN problems can be effectively assisted through the JST program.

Greg was an 18 y.o. Australian male referred by Centrelink to a JST agency in a large country town. Greg had left school at 16 after experiencing on-going frustration with the formal education system. After working for approximately 18 months as a trolley boy in a local supermarket, Greg claimed he had been laid off in favour of a younger job seeker.

Not unlike other young people, Greg was open about his LLN problems and quite ready to work with program staff on constructive programs to 'get around' the issue. Despite his literacy problems Greg was extremely personable and had excellent oral communication skills.

Greg was quite motivated in his job search but almost

exclusively targeted labouring and semi-skilled occupations that would not require developed written literacy skills. Greg applied for an advertised position as a slaughterman at the local meat works. The application for the position required the submission of an extensive written application form. Greg could barely handle the personal details required on the form and needed extensive assistance with all the other questions. Greg was more than capable of clearly verbally expressing answers to all questions yet had no ability to write the answers himself. With intensive one-to-one assistance to fill in the form and help prepare his first resume, Greg was finally selected for the job after an intensive interview process.

Before exiting the agency, Greg was given the name and contact details of a local LLN program that would assist him overcome his problem. Greg was very positive about his JST learning experience (the first formal and positive learning experience since leaving school) and stated his intention to "get back to school and do something about it" (i.e. his literacy deficit).

The JST coordinator made the point that Greg would not have secured this labouring job without the agency's assistance and probably would not have even applied for the position had he not been in a supportive JST environment. The agency emphasised the point that even for labouring and unskilled jobs the "days of walking into positions off the street are gone forever" and people with LLN problems like Greg are unlikely to secure work in the future without intensive job seeking support.

This case study highlights the important intervention role JST programs play when a participant with LLN problems can be willingly engaged in what they perceive as a critical learning endeavour. Greg had some distinct advantages in that his verbal skills were well developed and his self-esteem was reasonably healthy for his age and experience but, nonetheless, the case demonstrates the positive impact the JST program can have on mobilising a participant's confidence and sense of trust.

This case study also begs the question as to why the Centrelink, job seeker screening tool (ie. the Job Seeker Classification Instrument) had failed to ensure Greg's referral to the Job Network program that has ostensibly been established to assist such clients – the Intensive Assistance, case-management program. Because the JSCI relies mainly on the client's verbal answers to set questions (often consisting of a

telephone, or across-the counter, interview) there is little wonder clients like Greg find it easy to give a different impression about their LLN levels. Moreover, in the researcher's experience, many clients with LLN issues are likely to deny any problem when initially confronted with any form of authority.

This case study also helps to highlight the point made by many of the organisations surveyed about the central importance of providing individually focused programs for JST clients to ensure needs are met and potential barriers exposed.

Whilst this case study highlighted the issue raised by many agencies about clients with LLN difficulties restricting their career aspirations to manual and unskilled jobs, it does also tend to give substance to the point made by another agency in the study that younger job seekers, like Greg, are inclined to be more open about their LLN problems and, therefore, more motivated than the older job seekers to deal constructively with the problem.

Another issue raised by two of the surveyed agencies is also given a degree of credence in this case study. These are the JST programs that made the point that personality factors are also extremely important in determining how a job seeker with LLN problems will fare in the job market. Whilst Greg's career potential was certainly hindered to a large degree by his LLN deficits, his outgoing, verbally competent, and relatively confident demeanour was sufficient for him to secure a labouring position. However, as increasing numbers of low-skilled jobs disappear with the advent of new technology, one can readily imagine the kind of fate that awaits the Gregs of this world, particularly as they lose the vitality and confidence of youth.

Both of these case studies help to demonstrate the fact that the majority of agencies rely on informal assessment methods to identify clients with LLN problems. They also illustrate the fact that agencies have staff that are alert to the issue and who, despite resourcing constraints, are prepared and willing to adapt their program to meet the needs of clients like John and Greg. Both agencies appropriately encouraged the case study clients into considering further assistance for their LLN problem and attempted to build the clients' trust and confidence to consider further-training options.

Conclusion

Although many programs are dealing with LLN problems in a highly creative and effective manner, it remains a fact that these programs for the most part, lack the resources to deal effectively with clients with LLN deficits.

JST programs were tendered to agencies on a price competitive basis and were won within a price range from approximately $200 per job seeker at the low end, to around $500 per job seeker at the upper end. The paucity of resources available to the JST program stands in stark contrast to the fixed-price Intensive Assistance program where an average unit cost of between $3,000 to $5,000 is commonplace, depending on the relative extent of client need.

A number of agencies in this research made the point that they lacked both the time and resources to adequately deal with the needs of job seekers experiencing LLN difficulties. In retrospect, it would be interesting to discover if there was any correlation between the agencies making this claim and the relative size of the agencies' JST unit price. It would be reasonable to assume that those agencies delivering JST at unit costs on the lower end of the tendered continuum (e.g. less than $400) would certainly experience significant resource difficulties in delivering an effective service. Given that the JST predecessor program, the *Job Club* was delivered at a significantly higher unit funding level (between $600 and $750) one can only speculate to what degree the tendering process is damaging the ability of agencies to adequately resource job seekers particularly those with special needs.

Given the historical durability and continuing effectiveness of the JST program in achieving employment outcomes an argument could be made that in the interests of ensuring on-going viability and adequate resourcing, Job Search Training is a program that may well benefit from a fixed price tender process where performance, rather than price, is the key determinant in deciding which agencies are funded to deliver the program.

This research has demonstrated that the significant numbers of clients facing relatively severe barriers to employment are entering JST programs despite Centrelink's best effort to direct clients into the appropriate Job Network program. An argument could be mounted that outcome measures be extended to JST agencies that provide effective interventions for clients identified with LLN problems. This research

suggests the need for providing an outcome payment for those agencies that are able to demonstrate effective interventions for clients facing LLN difficulties. Clearly, many of the agencies surveyed in this research are already performing this role despite the current lack of resources.

This research has highlighted the fact that JST providers are in the main experienced and skilled operators. Much more could be achieved if additional resources were to be strategically deployed to those programs that have demonstrated their flexibility and creativity in the face of dealing with clients with LLN needs.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations arise from this research that will hopefully be taken up by the relevant Government Departments.

1 The severe limitations of the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI), as it is being currently applied by Centrelink staff, to effectively identify those job seekers facing LLN deficits has been highlighted by this research. If an effective LLN screening tool was in place, up to 20% of the job seekers currently being referred to Job Search Training programs in Victoria would be reassessed for a higher level of case-management support through the Intensive Assistance program.

At the very least, the JSCI needs to be revised to include a written component that can be utilised to assess a job seeker's literacy level against the national standards framework. Also, the introduction of a Literacy Assessment checklist tool, similar to the one developed by the Activate Training Centre in Prahran, would be of significant benefit to frontline Centrelink staff faced with the responsibility to accurately assess the level of job seekers need (see Appendix 2 for a copy of the Activate checklist). This revised tool would need to be relatively uncomplicated so Centrelink staff can be readily trained to apply the tool. Ultimately such a tool should result in a much higher rate of assessment reliability. The large number of job seekers obviously requiring immediate assistance from an intensive assistance type program would not need to languish for up to 18 months in anticipation of receiving this type of assistance.

2 The requirement for a greater degree of integration between Job Network agencies and specialist LLN providers has also been highlighted by this research. Of the agencies surveyed in this research, those agencies with a high degree of competence in handling the referral of clients with LLN problems to specialist support programs have developed a close working relationship with such programs. Not surprisingly, the two programs that have in-house LLN support programs demonstrated a much higher level of consciousness about LLN issues in general and both agencies have established and dedicated referral pathways between their Job network programs and their specialist LLN programs. At the very least, all providers of Job Network employment services need to be

made aware of their local specialists provider/s of LLN services, and ways need to be found to encourage the development of direct lines of referral.

3 This research has clearly focused on the important role that Job Search Training programs actually play in dealing effectively with the needs of job seekers facing multiple barriers to employment. As the research has demonstrated, the level of individual need faced by many job seekers referred to JST programs has forced a large percentage of the surveyed programs to adopt innovative, individualised methods of job search skills delivery. This raises the issue of the adequacy of resourcing for JST programs in general and, whether, the factor of price competitiveness in the Job Network tendering process does compromise the integrity and quality of program service delivery particularly to the more highly disadvantaged job seekers. Given the historical effectiveness of the Job Search program in both achieving job outcomes and in developing positive interventions for high need clients, there would seem to be some justification for DEWRSB to consider establishing a minimum pricing base for the JST program much in the same manner that such a base has already been established for the Intensive Assistance program.

4 Mechanisms need to be put into place to encourage greater cooperation and information sharing between JST providers. At present, the competitive basis of the Job Network's tendering system would appear to be hampering the sharing of best practice information amongst agencies. One could only hope that a move to a tendering process that relies more on measuring qualitative outcomes and less on price competitiveness, will help reduce the level of unproductive competition between programs and agencies so patently obvious throughout this survey.

Perhaps there is room for the funding body, DEWRSB, to play a more proactive role in the overall quality management of service delivery through the provision of regular, regional, state and nationally based training and best-practice seminars for JST staff. This would overcome the sense of working in isolation expressed by many of the surveyed practitioners' whilst maximising opportunities for the emergence of productive networks.

5 Perhaps some further research could be put into investigating the viability of Literacy Help Hotline and Literacy Help web page as suggested by one respondent to this survey. A well-publicised and centralised service of this type could provide a ready resource for people experiencing LLN difficulties as well for all the Job Network, adult education and community providers attempting to identify local referral points and appropriate resources for their clients.

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Appendix 1

A survey of literacy issues within job search training programs (FLEX 2) in Victoria

A research project funded by the Victorian Centre of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium.

Research conducted by
John Quelch BA; BSW; Dip. Ed. in association with MEP JOB *futures*

September/October 1999

Name of Agency _____

Name of person completing survey: _____

Position within organisation: _____

Contact Phone: _____

Email Address: _____

The following survey has been designed to be as user friendly as possible and should take approximately 45 minutes to complete.

1 How many clients have completed your Job Search Training program to date?
Total number _____

2 What qualifications do your Job Search Training staff have?

- ☐ Secondary education
- ☐ TAFE Graduate, Area: _____
- ☐ University Undergraduate Degree, Area: _____
- ☐ University Post Graduate Degree, Area: _____
- ☐ No formal qualifications

3 Approximately what percentage of your clients have been in the 18-24 year old age category?

_____ percent

4 Have clients with, what you would consider, literacy/numeracy problems, participated in your Job Search Training program?

☐ Yes ☐ No

5 Since the commencement of the Job Network, please estimate what percentage of your Job Search Training clients you would define as having some degree of literacy/numeracy problem?

_____ percent

6 Amongst which age group/s are literacy/numeracy problems more prevalent in your Job Search Training program?
(please tick appropriate box/s)

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45+

7 How are clients with literacy/numeracy difficulties identified in your Job Search Training program? (please tick appropriate box/s)

- ☐ At the time of referral
- ☐ Through self-disclosure
- ☐ At the time participants undertake written work

8 What do you regard as evidence that a client has a literacy/numeracy difficulty?

9 How do you assess client's literacy/numeracy difficulties within the program?

10 From your experience what are the main effects of low levels of literacy/numeracy amongst your Job Search Training clients?

11 To what extent does low literacy/numeracy levels amongst your Job Search Training clients interfere with satisfactory participation in your Job Search Training program? (please tick appropriate box)

☐ To a great extent ☐ To a moderate extent

☐ To a low extent ☐ Not at all

Could you please provide further information:

12 To what extent does low literacy/numeracy levels amongst your Job Search Training clients interfere with their ability to find suitable employment? (please tick appropriate box)

☐ To a great extent ☐ To a moderate extent

☐ To a low extent ☐ Not at all

Could you please provide further information:

36

13 What approaches have your Job Search Training personnel adopted in assisting Job Search Training clients deal with literacy/numeracy problems? Please describe:

14 In what ways does Job Search Training enhance the literacy levels of participants with low literacy/numeracy? Please describe:

15 Does your organisation have specific policies for dealing with clients with literacy/numeracy problems?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered YES to the above question could you provide brief details of the policy.

Appendix 2

Literacy/Numeracy Checklist

The following are indicators that a client may be experiencing literacy and numeracy problems.

Did not fill in form themselves or do any writing	
Constantly asking "What does this mean" – they are often asking you to read the form for them	
Writing style including grammar and spelling	
Single word answers (when more information is required)	
They ask for assistance because they have left their glasses at home/the writing is too small	
Ask you to write responses because their writing is too messy	
They did not like school and they left early	
If client did not have much schooling in their country of origin	
They find it difficult to get and keep a job	
They moved homes often when young	
Feel that they can only do unskilled labour/menial jobs	
Do not provide very much information about school life (often change subject)	
Often keep talking so no writing needs to occur	
OR – Single word answers only	
Their oracy skills are not well developed – poor use of grammar	
They get frustrated when trying to explain an idea (especially if complicated)	
When asked to prepare written work – they don't understand the task is a common response	
They often have trouble pronouncing "th"s and "g"s	
In groups they can be the clown/disruptive member	
Never hands in any work	
If client has a vocational degree in their country of origin – they are not appropriate for lit/num training but may require ESL training	

Never use the terms literacy or numeracy – always approach clients with information in regards to improving their skills and increasing their chances of gaining employment. Never talk about classes, school, lessons, or curriculum etc. Discuss activities, project outcomes and contribution that client could make to outcome of project. Refer to co-ordinator if more information is required.

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